

Agriculture in Ancient Egypt

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Farmers threshing grain in Ancient Egypt. This is one of the many scenes of harvest depicted in the burial chamber of Menna, a scribe who may have lived during the reign of Thutmose IV in the 14th century B.C. Photo by: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons.

Agriculture was the foundation of ancient Egypt. The ability to grow crops was extremely important for the people of this region in North Africa. Basic farming practices took root about 8,000 years ago, but there is some evidence that some early agriculture had taken place even 2,000 years before that.



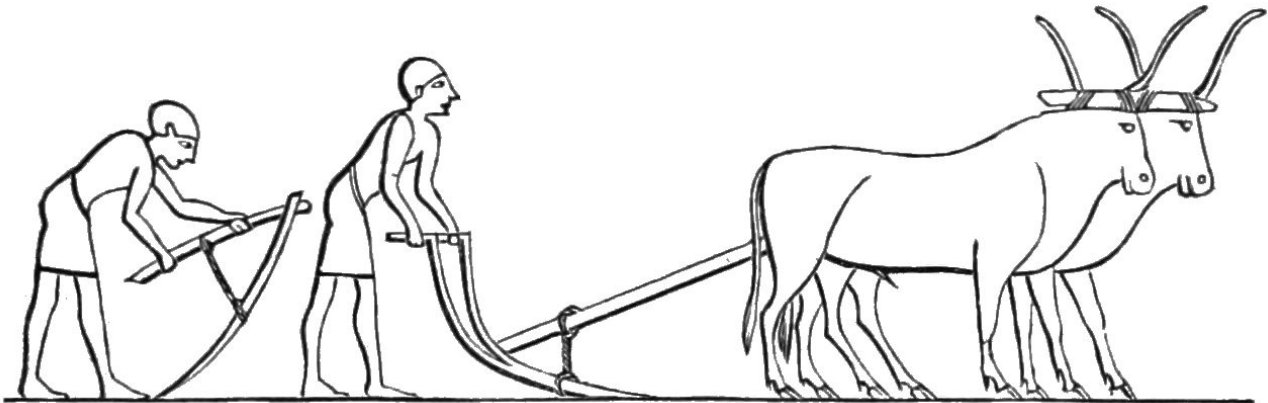
Egyptologist and historian Margaret Bunson defines ancient Egyptian agriculture as the actions of the ancient Egyptians that allowed them to turn dry lands into rich fields after the inundation of the Nile. Inundation refers to the flooding of the Nile River, when each year its waters rose over its banks to leave nutrient-rich soil on the land. This soil was ideal for growing many different crops in great quantity. Without this flooding, Egyptian culture could not have taken hold in the Nile River Valley.

In a good season, Egypt's fertile fields produced enough food to feed every person in the region, and better years produced additional food. This extra food was kept in storage facilities owned by the government. It could be used for trade or saved for times when food was less plentiful. A bad growing season was always the result of a shallow flooding by the Nile. Even in years of heavy rain, crops still depended on the Nile flooding.

As a result, the yearly flood became an important part of ancient Egyptian culture and mythology. Among the most famous myths is the story of the death and resurrection of the god Osiris. It is thought to represent the Nile's importance as a source of life.

Tools and practices

The yearly flooding was the most important event for Egyptian agriculture, but people still needed to work the land. Fields had to be plowed and seeds planted, while water needed to be transported to the field. These needs led to the invention of the ox-drawn plow and improvements in irrigation. The invention of irrigation meant that water could travel from rivers and creeks to fields by moving through man-made ditches or canals.



Once a field was plowed, workers used tools, such as hoes, to break up the clumps of soil. With the ground properly prepared, seeds were hauled to the field in baskets. Workers filled smaller baskets or sacks from these larger containers. Then they walked the fields, flinging seeds into the soil.

Canals

All of this work would have been for nothing, however, if the seeds did not receive enough water. This made irrigation extremely important. Canals were necessary to carry water to inland farms as well as to fields nearer the Nile.

These canals were expertly built. They had to efficiently bring water to acres and acres of land. It was the responsibility of officials to make sure that water was not wasted, including making certain that canals were kept in good working order.

Animal husbandry, crops and products

Most Egyptians lived on a mostly vegetarian diet. Staple crops of ancient Egypt included chickpeas, lentils and a grain known as emmer. Lettuce, onions, garlic, corn, barley, flax and the castor oil plant were also cultivated.

Meat was expensive and had to be eaten quickly before it rotted. As a result, it was mostly saved for royalty and rich people, or for special occasions. Livestock used for meat included cattle, lambs, sheep, goats and poultry. Poorer Egyptians often ate fish instead of meat.



Some plants were grown to make things other than food. Papyrus, for example, was used to make paper. Additionally, papyrus was made into sandals, rope, toys, boxes, baskets, mats, window shades and even small fishing boats. Another plant was the castor oil plant, which was crushed and made into lamp oil or consumed as a health tonic.

One of the most important crops was called emmer. This grain was used in the production of bread, a daily part of the Egyptian diet. It was also used to make beer, the most popular drink. After papyrus, emmer was probably the most important crop grown in Egypt.

Farmers and trade

Farmers made their living from their crops in a number of ways. Private landowners could do as they wished with their fields and livestock. Most farmers, though, worked on land owned by others. They tended the fields and typically gave most of what they grew to the farm owner. They were allowed to keep a small amount for themselves. Agriculture was primarily done by men, but women and children often kept small family gardens.

Agriculture and personal wealth

Farm products were also an essential part of barter systems. Bartering refers to the trading of goods for other goods and services, rather than for money. This system existed throughout the villages of Egypt, but was also the practice in the cities and in international trade. Egypt traded its agricultural products to other ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, the Levant, India, Nubia, the Land of Punt (modern-day Somalia) and others in exchange for goods from these lands.

Crops were also harvested and stored at the local level. A portion was then collected by rulers. Today, citizens pay tax money to the government, but in ancient Egypt, people paid the government in crops.

Following the annexation of Egypt by Rome about 2,100 years ago, Egypt served as a "breadbasket" of the Roman Empire. Egypt was increasingly called upon to supply food for that empire's ever-expanding reach.

Conclusion

Today, many farms in Egypt are owned by big companies that use advanced technology. However, some old farming practices can still be seen on small farms, even in modern Egypt.

Quiz

- 1 Which section explains how the ancient Egyptian government made profits from farmers' crops?
- (A) "Canals"
 - (B) "Animal husbandry, crops and products"
 - (C) "Farmers and trade"
 - (D) "Agriculture and personal wealth"
- 2 Select the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] that BEST supports the idea that the Nile River was essential to the establishment of ancient Egyptian civilization.
- 3 Which sentence from the article is BEST supported by the image in the section "Tools and Practices?"
- (A) The ability to grow crops was extremely important for the people of this region in North Africa.
 - (B) These needs led to the invention of the ox-drawn plow and improvements in irrigation.
 - (C) All of this work would have been for nothing, however, if the seeds did not receive enough water.
 - (D) Livestock used for meat included cattle, lambs, sheep, goats and poultry.
- 4 Examine the satellite image of the Nile River in the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].
- How does this image contribute to the reader's understanding of the Nile River's importance to Egyptian farmers?
- (A) by showing readers what the Nile River region looks like in a year of heavy flooding
 - (B) by allowing readers to view the full length of the Nile River
 - (C) by illustrating the direct effects the Nile River has on the surrounding land
 - (D) by giving readers a better idea of where the Nile River is located